

## WHCoA Connecticut Public Forum and Listening Session

May 5, 2015

LOB Hartford, CT

I'm glad to see all of you here and thank Commission Ritter for inviting The CT Association of Municipal Agents for the Elderly to have a voice at this so very important event. The United States government is getting ready to determine what the future of aging will look like for the next ten years. On May 28<sup>th</sup> the final listening session will happen in Boston. This will be CT's opportunity to state what we see as the most pressing needs. It's our collective opportunity to tell Washington what we see as our needs and to relay what we see as new, different and perhaps better ways to do things as well.

We can all agree on certain basic needs such as transportation and elderly nutrition. These services are critical. They enable many of our elderly to remain in the community and be independent. I'd like to use meals on wheels as just one example of how the system has gotten stuck. This program is a daily hot meal to the homebound. For many homebound seniors the person who delivers their daily meal is the only person they see or talk to that day. Meals on Wheels partners with the congregate meal program that provides hot meals in a group setting. The congregate meals provide excellent opportunities for the elderly to socialize. The food for both meal programs supply one third of the daily nutritional requirements. But we all know that the food pyramid has changed a number of times in the last 20 years. In fact it's now called MyPyramid and must be considered for revision every five years. Our dietary needs have changed greatly since the 70's. What we choose to eat has changed even more. We no longer eat meat, potatoes and vegetables as a hot meal at noon. We eat more salads, more fresh vegetables. We eat yogurt. Who even heard of yogurt back in the late 60's and early 70's. We, also, don't eat many foods due to dietary restrictions. Many are intolerant to lactose, gluten, eggs and many other foods. We eat better. We are more aware of our health than ever before.

But the makeup of the meals we serve to our homebound and at the congregate sites remains the same. There has been no real change in what is served today verse what was served 30 years ago. We continue to fund this program with more and more money but we don't look at better ways to spend the money and better ways to provide the food more seniors would prefer. As we move into the next ten years we need to look at spending existing dollars in new ways.

Again using Elderly Nutrition as an example - and this example can be applied to nearly every program – Meals on wheels could bring the homebound a half gallon of milk and a loaf of bread every 2 weeks and save a huge amount of money in one year. Rather than bagging individual slices of bread and buying pints of meal to be delivered daily.

Another example of change - If a congregate meal site cannot no longer meet the required weekly average for attendance the "Meals on Wheels" lunch could be delivered to that same site. The seniors could still sit and enjoy the meal together but the program would again save money by closing that daily site. Thereby saving of staffing and supplies. Again I want to point out the shift in the number of elderly

eating at these sites is not a lack of need. It is very much an indication that the program has not changed to meet the needs of the population it serves.

Some locations have chosen to not be a congregate site and have created their own meal programs. This, too, should be seen as another way to save large amounts of money. Or funding could be redirected enabling the creation of more these sites which would serve more elderly.

Could we create a WIC type program for seniors to use to buy the food they would eat? Could we attract more hungry seniors by providing the food they eat? It's all about getting the food seniors eat to them in a manner that the country can pay for.

Even the Presidents budget regarding the Older Americans Act calls for \$20 million in new funding for nutrition modernization that "would support competitive grants to translate research into evidence-based models states can use to implement more efficient and effective nutrition programs."

This program provides a vital service to a great many seniors across the country. It is essential that it continue but let's look at each aspect of that program and feed more people with those same dollars.

One very important resource that more attention should be given to is the senior centers and the Municipal Agents. Those workers in the community work directly with the elderly population. Senior centers and Municipal Agents are most often the first place and people the seniors go to for help. The Senior Centers by definition of the Area Agency on Aging are the community focal points for the elderly. Both the senior center and the Municipal Agents provide critical information and services to older adults and serve as a community hub. Both are the front line – boots on the ground – for a wide range of services and social interaction. Most if not all operate of shoe string budgets but provide the services needed for seniors to age in place at little cost to the taxpayer. We have to wonder what more could be done with just a small amount dollars.

We need to look at the needs of the senior in their own home and ask how we keep them there longer. How do we enrich their lives so they are healthier longer? Should we be offering gym memberships to seniors who will use it to get up and move thus staying in their home longer? Many senior centers already offer a wide range of exercise. Again funding to the community based service, like senior centers, is the cheapest way to provide for the expanding elderly population. We all know the senior at home is the cheapest for the government. We need to do more low cost programs like senior centers do.

They can and do get a huge amount done now. Imagine how much more they could get done with just one more employee and some program funding. Money spent this way is probably the most cost

effective way taxpayer's dollars can be spent. As the population ages shouldn't funding be shifted towards the community resource that provides the most service? Funding senior centers and Municipal Agents, who do so much with very limited dollars, would prove to be one of the most cost effective ways to ensure direct services to our seniors.

In other states – Massachusetts as example – funding goes directly from the state to the towns. The towns are given a certain amount of dollars per senior in their community. This would be a great way for Connecticut to support the work done by the Senior Centers and the Municipal Agents.

We need to spend our money in better ways so we free up money to fund our future. As the aging population explodes with baby boomers, Connecticut and America needs to move in a new direction. Baby boomers have always been the largest segment of the population and our country has always changed and adapted to accommodate them. It will be no different as they age. We, Connecticut and the country must become proactive!

We need to look at each program and ask. Has it lived its natural lifespan and is no longer needed? If that program is still needed is there a better way to do provide the program? Reform does not always have to mean reduction. It can and should mean redirection of dollars to needed services.

We need to find new ways to spend old dollars. We need to offer today and tomorrow's seniors the programs they will use, the food they will eat and new ways of keeping them in their homes longer.

Respectfully submitted

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